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OPEN FORUM

California's schools/Will AB2160 improve them?

Give teachers more say

By Wayne Johnson

A RECENT study by National University shows that teachers who leave education say that the major reason is the level of stress in their jobs. California's teachers are frustrated at having so little control over their professional lives. This lack of control is a leading cause of teacher burnout and one reason why half of beginning teachers quit within five years.

The solution to this problem is simple.

Give California's public school teachers a greater say in how the schools are run. That's what many registered voters say, too. According to a recent poll undertaken by the California Teachers Association, 71 percent of voters indicated that they approve of giving teachers the power to negotiate about professional issues, such as class discipline, textbooks and classroom materials.

Our association is sponsoring new legislation, AB 2160, to do just that — expand the state's bargaining law to improve student learning. The bill would give teachers, not school district bureaucrats, the right to negotiate the procedures by which local decisions are made about curriculum, textbooks, teacher training and other classroom matters.

Consider the issue of the state's underperforming schools. The new CTA poll shows that 78 percent of voters believe teachers should have the right to negotiate how to evaluate and assist these troubled schools.

But teachers' hands are tied. Current collective bargaining laws only allow teachers to negotiate wages, hours and working conditions. California needs to level the playing field for all students by tapping into the collective wisdom of teachers.

For the first time, educators would be able to negotiate the procedures for hiring the "external evaluators" used by school districts to come up with action plans to help troubled schools in the state's Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program. Too often, these overpaid "evaluators" are former school administrators who apply "cookie cutter" approaches and ignore local teachers' insights into why a school is struggling.

For the first time, teachers will be able to develop programs to increase parental involvement in schools — a missing ingredient at many low-performing schools where language barriers may keep parents from actively participating.

This bill will not overturn any state or federal law. The state's mandated testing program and new academic standards will not be affected. Only issues under the jurisdiction of the local school board could be negotiated.

The bill does do something extraordinary, however. It acknowledges that teachers are the state's most valuable resource for generating plans, ideas and decisions about programs to enhance student learning and teacher training.

Teachers are not part of the problem — they are part of the solution.

AB2160 gives teachers the right to negotiate the procedures for selecting textbooks and instructional materials, the procedures for developing curriculum and implementing programs to encourage parental involvement, and the procedures for defining local educational objectives. It would give teachers a greater voice in the maintenance of school facilities — and in deciding how to involve more educators on school site councils and other committees that make decisions about local schools.

Californians support a far greater role for teachers in deciding how to practice their profession. That's because it's the teachers and parents who know kids best, not school boards, not school district superintendents. The state Legislature should acknowledge this basic fact by enacting this bill of professional rights for California's teachers.

Wayne Johnson is the president of the California Teachers Association.

New bill won't help teachers

By Jeanne Allen

THE MOVE by California's largest labor union to get more control over a child's education is an outrageous power grab destined to hurt schools. United against a bill that would put the union in charge of the classroom is a diverse array of school boards, charter schools, administrators, business and technology leaders and, most importantly, parents.

To hear union boss Wayne Johnson, one would think that this bill was an attempt to elevate the status of teachers and treat them as professionals. The truth is that the bill has nothing to do with teachers and everything to do with special interests.

School performance for the California Teachers Association is akin to the energy crisis for Enron. The public is demanding higher performance at all schools, requiring teachers to account for much higher levels of progress. And with new federal testing requirements, the sun will shine greater on all of the results.

That should make a group claiming to represent teachers all the more concerned about ensuring higher expectations for new teachers and giving them more authority in their classrooms. More union involvement will not empower individual teachers, but will give an elite group of bargaining agents the ability to dictate how schools should run.

The motive is clear — CTA believes that it must protect teachers from external efforts to hold them accountable. If unions are able to dictate through the bargaining process everything from textbook selection to curriculum to assessment, they will seek the least challenging of programs so that all will do well.

Rank-and-file teachers believe that the union has little confidence that they will excel in an environment that requires them to perform. What comfort is that to Golden State parents, who have entrusted their children to schools where the CTA already governs a large segment of the population?

Parents are horrified that union contracts already dictate basic policies and spending levels, giving administrators little flexibility to make necessary changes to boost achievement. Johnson would take away what little power parents have to influence their schools. Union negotiations are typically secret, and they would remain closed to parents under AB2160 unless the parents could demonstrate some "expertise."

Recently, a study by a Bay Area think-tank found that the more control the union has, the lower the district's test scores.

If the union really wanted to influence better schools, its leaders would offer results in exchange for the desired control rather than demand control without accountability. Late last decade, there was praise from pundits that "new unionism" had reached the teacher unions. But Johnson is considered among the least progressive teacher union leaders in the land.

California needs a real debate about teacher quality. The research is incontrovertible. Teachers perform well when they have daily flexibility, authority to manage their classrooms and programs, and benefits that are largely tied to their level of responsibility and ability to perform.

As the nation moves more toward arrangements that make this kind of real local control possible, California seems anchored on proposals doomed to bring schools down.

When a majority of children are still way behind, policymakers should shut out proposals like this one and expand upon choice and accountability efforts that raise student achievement and give parents more, not less, control in the schools they fund.

Jeanne Allen is president of the Center for Education Reform in Washington, D.C.



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AB2160 — a step in the wrong direction

By Dan B. Walden

WHEN IT comes to selecting textbooks and developing curriculum, teachers are natural partners with elected school board members. The California School Boards Association, representing more than 5,000 school board members statewide, believes teachers should be active participants in those decisions.

But a recent proposal by the California Teachers Association would seriously warp the healthy relationship that now exists between school boards and certificated professionals. The bill, AB2160, would radically expand the scope of collective bargaining.

Under the proposal, the union's exclusive representatives, not classroom teachers, would negotiate important decisions about academic programs, professional development, parent involvement, building maintenance and other areas in a process that, by design, is an adversarial one.

The collective bargaining process is not the way to ensure teachers have a voice in these areas. There are three good reasons for this:

■ First, parents and others in the community are already encouraged to be part of the decision-making process through school

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site councils, advisory committees and public meetings. Their participation is one of the cornerstones of public education.

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■ Second, the proposal would increase the cost of administration by millions of dollars per year. Administrators, teachers and attorneys will be required to spend much more time to reach agreement. That's money that should be going to support instructional programs.

■ Third, this bill undermines our state accountability system by shifting authority over academics to the teachers' union without shifting accountability for the results. The Public Schools Accountability Act makes school boards and administrators — not teachers or their unions — responsible for improving student performance. They also receive the sanctions.

On the other hand, teachers are protected by tenure and seniority rights. Our association believes that all education professionals, as well as parents, must work together in a collaborative and collegial manner — rather than an adversarial one — to provide the best educational opportunities for our children.

CTA's proposal takes us in the opposite direction, and we strongly oppose it.

Dan B. Walden is president of the California School Boards Association.